

Second Sunday In Lent + March 12, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
John 3:1-17

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Have you ever had a question that you really, really wanted answered but you were embarrassed to ask because you were afraid it would reveal your ignorance on the topic? Kids aren't afraid to ask these questions, probably because it's OK that they don't know very much and they don't have the unfortunate sense of shame we acquire as we grow older. A good example was the questions shared on Facebook a few days ago by a friend whose 7-year-old son was wondering how electricity works. "Mom," he had asked her, "how does electricity go from one cable to another? After it goes to our house does it go into another cable? Is electricity black? No? What color is it? How small is it? Is it smaller than geese? Is it smaller than my eyes look when I'm asleep?"

In our Gospel reading today, Nicodemus has some questions for Jesus he desperately wants answered, but he is embarrassed to ask them in broad daylight. This was not only because Nicodemus was highly respected as a Pharisee, a teacher, but he was also a member of the Sanhedrin, a local council of judges. So he was someone people looked to for answers, not one they expected to see asking questions. This is why Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.

Let's put ourselves at the scene. It's the middle of the night. What is Nicodemus doing up at this hour? Maybe he was studying the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Rabbis often stayed up late studying scripture. But more likely, his mind was racing with thoughts about Jesus, this man who he'd heard people call the Lamb of God, the Son of God, and the King of Israel. Maybe Nicodemus' thoughts went like this: "I heard he turned water into wine....They're saying he is the

Messiah, the Son sent from God...I wonder if they're right, because how can he make wine out of water if he is not sent from God? But if he is sent from God, why has he not studied with our rabbis? If he is sent from God, why is he critical of our practices? What does that say about us?"

Nicodemus couldn't sleep. So out he goes out under the cloak of night, to find Jesus. We know from later in John's Gospel that Nicodemus was a decent man: Not only does he defend Jesus to other Pharisees in Chapter 7, but in Chapter 19, after the crucifixion, he brings 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to help Joseph of Arimathea wrap Jesus' body in spices and linen cloths. So he may have secretly ached in the hope that what he had heard about Jesus was true. After all, things had really gone downhill in Judea since Pontius Pilate took over. He was despised by the Jews not only because of his gross insensitivity to their customs but because of his violence against them. Recorded history tells of an incident in which Pilate took money from the Jewish Temple to build an aqueduct. When the Jews gathered to protest, soldiers that Pilate had hidden in the crowd randomly begin to attack, beat and kill the Jews in an effort to silence their voices. Other writers of the time described Pilate's "corruption, his acts of insolence, his habit of insulting people, his cruelty, and his never-ending, gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity."

So here is Nicodemus late at night, craving perhaps the good news of new hope for God's people, knock, knock, knockin' on Jesus' door. Jesus opens the door and looks at him expectantly. Then Nicodemus falls into the trap we often do when we meet someone famous: We start babbling about how great we think they are. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent from God. For no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

But Jesus is not an easy mark for flattery. He cuts right to the chase. "I know why you are here. You want to get into the kingdom of God, don't you? Well, here is the deal: No one can see (meaning participate in, experience) the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Many of us are accustomed to the translation "born again." That was how Nicodemus heard it, in a literal sense. "Born again?" he says, incredulous. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

But Jesus meant born anew, or reborn in the Holy Spirit. If we were there, we might have said: "Nicodemus, don't you want to be born from above? Casting off your old selfish ways and living an entirely new life, freed from the fear of death? Come on, yes or no? What are you afraid of?"

Nicodemus is afraid. He's afraid that being born from above will mean losing control, and he likes control. He likes knowing who was righteous and who is a sinner, what to eat and what not to eat, with whom to associate and who to label "unclean."

To him, Jesus' comparison of being born from above with the action of the wind was probably a frightening one because the wind is unpredictable, wafting away items to which we have become attached and blowing in others we might not have chosen. If we start letting the wind of the Spirit blow through our souls, our church, our families, who knows what might be blown out and what might blow in? Old ways out and new ways in? Resentments and prejudices we have cultivated for decades, out the window? Anger that has been our driving force each day, anger at systems that don't work properly, at people who don't do their jobs or share our views—all that drifting up into the rafters? Sorrows we have held onto for dear life, fearing emptiness if we let them go, wafting to the back of the sanctuary? What might take the place of all these—fragrant breezes scented with hope,

with the simple joy of living, and with new possibilities? IF we don't let the wind of the Spirit blow through our lives, we'll never know.

Other than those two other mentions in John's Gospel, we don't really know what happened to Nicodemus after this encounter. He may have endured a lot more sleepless nights. Perhaps he kept a scrapbook of Jesus' appearances and achievements, following from a distance. But perhaps seeds of righteousness through faith like Paul talks about in our second reading today were being sown that night. We might think that, because his daring nighttime excursion and bold questions yielded what is perhaps the best-known verse in all Scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

We can cherish this word by word: "For God SO loved"—not just love but a supreme love. "For God so LOVED," with love being the most powerful force in the universe and the tense of the Greek verb referring not only to past but to present and future—love, therefore, being the most powerful force in the universe for all the cosmos, for all that ever was and ever will be. "For God so loved the WORLD"—our sinful world, our broken world, supremely loved by God nonetheless...and not just the world but all those in it, including our very selves, each of us, supremely loved by God. And what did God do out of that love? He gave his only Son, to suffer on the cross and take the entire burden of human sin upon himself, to free us from that, that we may never fear death but have eternal life—here, now, forever.

Let's bring the impace of this verse home, for each of us, by saying it in present tense, and substituting our own name for "world" and "everyone who believes in him." So if Eli was saying it, it will sound like this: "For God so loves Eli, that he gave his own Son, so that Eli may not perish but may have eternal life." Together now: AMEN